

Physician Assistants (PAs) provide health care services under the supervision of a physician. PAs are authorized to write prescriptions, dispense drugs, and order medications, tests and treatments in hospitals, clinics, nursing homes and other health facilities. Physician assistants are a relatively new profession, developed in the 1960s, as a way to make use of the skills learned by non-physician military medical personnel and to reduce the burden on physicians in hospitals. Their potential for improving access to primary care became apparent early on, and over time, states began to allow a broader scope of practice under their licensure. Currently PAs are licensed in 43 states and the District of Columbia, certified in three, and registered in four. In North Carolina the Assistant to the Primary Care Physician Program began at Duke University in 1965 and authority to “delegate” practice responsibilities was authorized by the General Assembly in 1971. Licensure was established in 1974. North Carolina currently has four PA programs.

National data on the supply of PAs have not been regularly collected until recent years and the data used in this report exhibit considerable variation before 1994. The national PA-to-population ratio was higher than the state’s from 1994-2002, and then dropped suddenly in 2003 (Figure 16). North Carolina’s PA supply has increased the most in metropolitan counties over the last 27 years (Figure 17). The PA supply has increased steadily in non-PHPSA counties and part-county PHPSAs, while the supply in whole-county PHPSAs has consistently lagged behind (Figure 18).

Six counties, four of which are in eastern North Carolina, had no active PAs in 2005 (Figure 19). Sixty-seven counties experienced a net increase in PA supply over the last five years, while 27 counties had a decline in PA-to-population ratios including two counties, Hyde and Warren, which lost all of their active PAs (Figure 20).

Table 3: Summary Statistics for Physician Assistants in North Carolina

| Physician Assistants per 10,000 Population | | Total Active Physician Assistants | |
|---|------|--------------------------------------|-------|
| 1979: | 0.55 | 1979: | 318 |
| 2001: | 2.48 | 2001: | 2,032 |
| 2005: | 3.09 | 2005: | 2,674 |

Number of Physician Assistants per 10,000 Population in 2005

| | |
|------------------------|------|
| Metropolitan Areas: | 3.50 |
| Nonmetropolitan Areas: | 2.16 |

For the 11 counties designated as whole county PHPSAs*: 1.50

For the 27 counties designated as part county PHPSAs*: 2.98

For the 62 counties not designated as PHPSAs*: 3.22

County Level Data

- # of counties increasing physician assistant supply, 2001-2005: 67
- # of counties decreasing physician assistant supply, 2001-2005: 29
- # of counties with no physician assistants in 2005: 6

*Persistent Health Professional Shortage Area